

COWRIE

From Marine Animal to Terrestrial Marvel



Bharati Debi
Anshu Prokash Nandan

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**Anthropological Survey of India
Ministry of Tourism and Culture
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FOREWORD

The Anthropological Survey of India has been documenting life and cultures of the people of India in general and tribes in particular through collection of objects of material culture, preparation of documentary films, photographs etc. as one of its primary objectives.

In recent years, the Survey proposes to bring out a series of Coffee-Table Book with a view to bringing into relief the anthropological perspective of the creative and aesthetic excellence of the tribes of India for the benefit of general readers. The present publication **Cowrie—From Marine Animal to Terrestrial Marvel** is third in the series, the other two publications being **Hairstyle—Panorama of the Tribal World** and **Combs—Tribes in India**.

The important role of the cowries in the economic transaction of the people of India in the distant past, is well known. In the cultural sphere this aquatic animal has no less significant place. Importance of the cowries can be seen in their close association with magico-religious performance, various rituals in the life cycle, recreation, adornment and in many such other areas. Dr (Mrs) Bharati Debi and Shri A. P. Nandan, authors of this small informative and interesting Coffee-Table Book deserve special appreciation for drawing our attention to an aspect which was unattended so far.

Hope, this publication would inspire others to search for documentation of many other such aspects of cultural significance of the people of India.

J. K. Sarkar
Director-in-Charge
Anthropological Survey of India

INTRODUCTION

The creative human mind has made use of many things from nature that comes in his way, be it living or non-living. Porcelain like shell of small gastropods, commonly known as cowrie, is an example in this regard.

Cowries have been unearthed from Palaeolithic and Neolithic remains in different parts of the world. Proto-historic remains of some Mohenjodaro settlements have produced a few cowries but the purpose and use remains undeciphered. In the later ages cowrie was so extensively used by the tribes and castes that its mention in literature, legends, proverbs, rhymes and riddles is common.

Cowrie is the shell of an invertebrate aquatic creature. Zoologists place it under Phylum Mollusca and Class Gastropoda. Its generic name, *Cypraea* might have been derived from the Greek goddess Cypraea, associated with love, beauty and charm. It has a number of species like *Cypraea moneta*, *Cypraea annul*, *Cypraea arabica*, *Cypraea cicercula*, *Cypraea talpa*, *Cypraea mappa*, *Cypraea childreni* and so on. Shallow tropical water throughout the world especially of the Pacific and the Indian Oceans is the habitat of this animal. Its soft body is enveloped within a hard shell of calcium.

Many people in Europe, Africa, America, Asia and the Pacific have used cowrie or use it even now in funeral, marriage or circumcision rites, as hunting and fishing amulet, as sacrificial gift to rivers, springs or trees; as ornament or money.

In ancient China, from the end of second millennium B.C. cowrie was used as currency to purchase cereals, copper vessels, cloth fabric and other commodities for domestic use. Cowrie was used variously in Japan, Formosa, Fiji, Melanesia, Borneo, Balkan, Scandinavia, Syria, Senegal, Cameroon and Egypt. Cowries were made to represent the eyes of some mummies in Egypt.

In India cowrie was used as currency in markets to purchase general commodities perhaps, during Mauryan Period. Fa-hsien, the Chinese traveller

states (399-411 A.D.) that the use of cowrie shells as currency was prevalent in India during the Gupta Period along with currency. In British India the use of cowrie as currency was present in many places. The extensive use of cowrie as currency in India made cowrie a synonym and symbol for money.

It is evident from the report of Ibn Battuta (1325-1349 A.D.) that cowrie was imported from Maldives to the eastern part of India in exchange of rice, cloth and sundries.

Large scale use of cowrie in daily life as well as for ceremonial purposes and entertainment by the tribes of India living in different geophysical surroundings suggests that cowries were traded regularly in the local markets by traders. The traders mainly used waterways both for inland transport and for the purpose of import as well. However, specific information regarding the route through which the cowries reached the tribes of hill region still remains unexplored.

Cowrie is worn for multifarious purposes irrespective of sex. It is mostly used as ornament decorating both body and hair. It is also used for ornamentation of cloth. Some of the cowrie-studded cloths are indicative of the wearer's social hierarchy or gallantry.

Cowrie is associated with various beliefs, rites and rituals connected with the important events of life cycle like birth, marriage and death.

Cowrie is used while playing games for recreation or gambling. It is extensively used in magico-religious practices. It is considered to be associated with fertility and fecundity. Cowrie is burnt to procure lime and is consumed along with tobacco.

This catalogue highlights the importance of cowrie in the Indian context with special reference to the present day tribes in India.

Communities and States

COMMUNITY	STATE	COMMUNITY	STATE	COMMUNITY	STATE
Adi	Arunachal Pradesh	Godagalu	Andhra Pradesh	Lambadi	Andhra Pradesh
Aheriya	Uttar Pradesh	Gond	Chhattisgarh	Madiga	Andhra Pradesh &
Apa Tani	Arunachal Pradesh	Great Andamanese	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	Tamil Nadu	
Baiga	Madhya Pradesh	Hill Maria	Chhattisgarh	Mech	West Bengal
Banjara	Karnataka, Maharashtra & Rajasthan	Irula	Kerala	Meghwali	Rajasthan
Bauri	Orissa	Jarawa	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	Monpa	Arunachal Pradesh
Bhandari	Orissa	Jhoria Muria	Chhattisgarh	Muria	Chhattisgarh
Bhatra	Chhattisgarh	Juang	Orissa	Naga	Nagaland &
Bison-horn Maria	Chhattisgarh	Kaniyan	Kerala	Oraon	Manipur
Bondo	Orissa	Kharia	Jharkhand	Panika	Jharkhand
Dandasi	Orissa	Khasi	Meghalaya	Rabari	Orissa
Dhulia	Chhattisgarh	Korava	Tamil Nadu	Raghvi	Gujarat
Dhurwa	Chhattisgarh	Korku	Madhya Pradesh	Raj Gond	Maharashtra
Dorla	Chhattisgarh	Kota	Tamil Nadu	Rajput	Andhra Pradesh
Gallong	Arunachal Pradesh	Kunvi	Gujarat	Sulung	Rajasthan
Garhwali	Uttaranchal	Lakher	Mizoram	Toda	Arunachal Pradesh
					Tamil Nadu

Ornaments

Cowrie is extensively used for ornamentation of body and hair. The earliest use of cowrie as ornament is suggested by some earthen figurines unearthed from the prehistoric remains at Baluchistan.

The Lambadi and the Juang women like to decorate their hair with cowries.



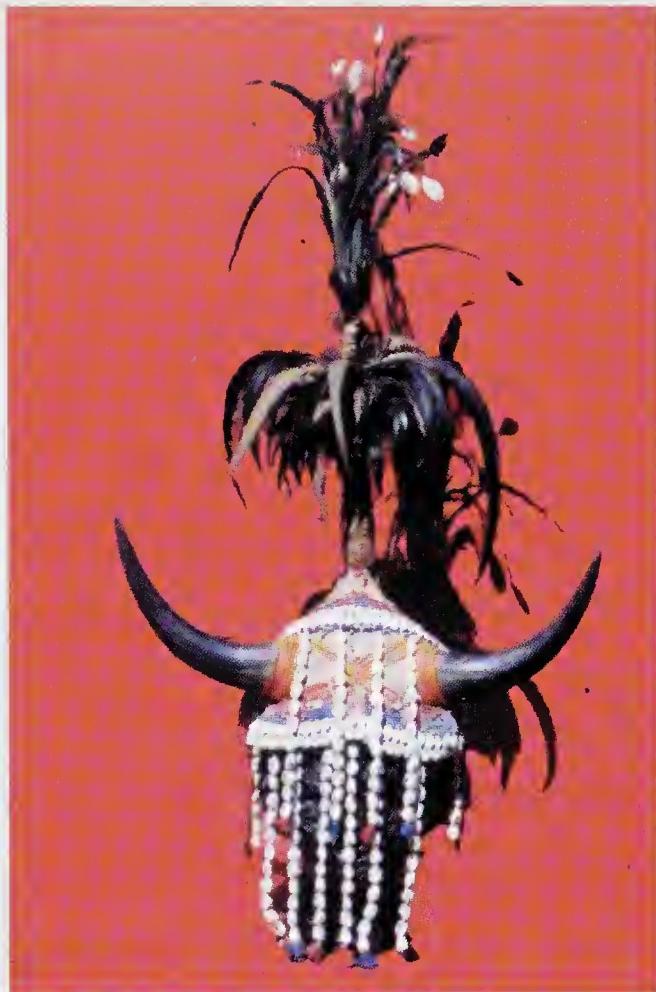
MURIA
Chhattisgarh



SULUNG
Arunachal Pradesh

The Sulung girls hang colourful woollen tufts from either side of the bun. The ends of the tufts are ornamented with cowries.

Motiasi, the young unmarried girls of the Murias, use a mass of cowries to cover their entire coiffure. Married Muria women never wear bunch of cowries in their hair. The Jhoria girls often wear rows of comb with thick bunches of cowries in their hair. The Baiga girls twist their hair with coloured wool interlaced with cowries.



BISON-HORN MARIA
Chhattisgarh

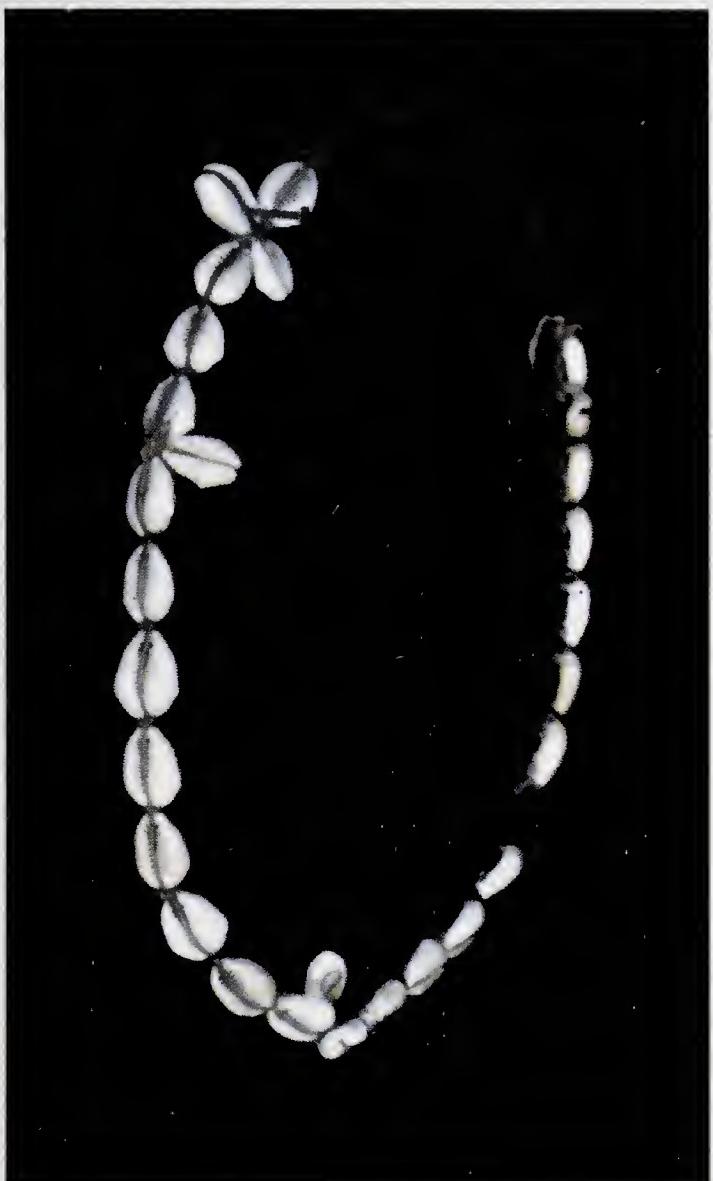
The Bison-horn Marias use a unique headdress during dancing. They fix two bison horns on a bamboo cap looking almost like those on a live bison together with plumes of a peacock's feather. A brightly coloured turban is wound around the cap and strings of cowrie shells flow down over the face of the dancer.



BISON-HORN MARIA
Chhattisgarh



BISON-HORN MARIA
Chhattisgarh

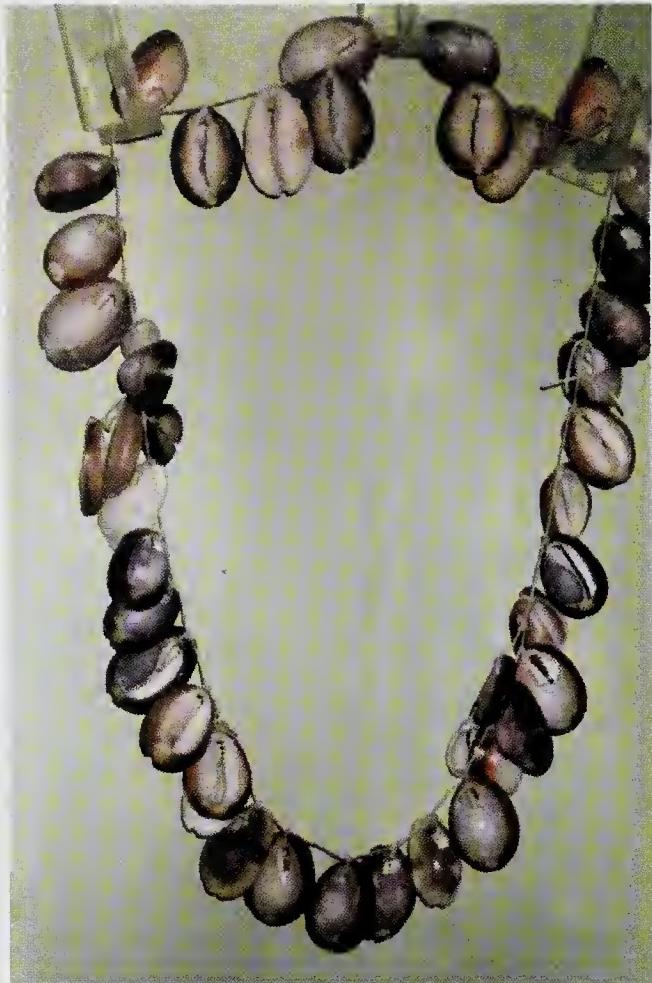


MURIA
Chhattisgarh



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

Young unmarried Muria boys (*chelik*) wear headband of cowries to tie up their hair. The cowries are attached to a cord of sago-palm fibre.



JARAWA
Andaman & Nicobar Islands



JARAWA
Andaman & Nicobar Islands



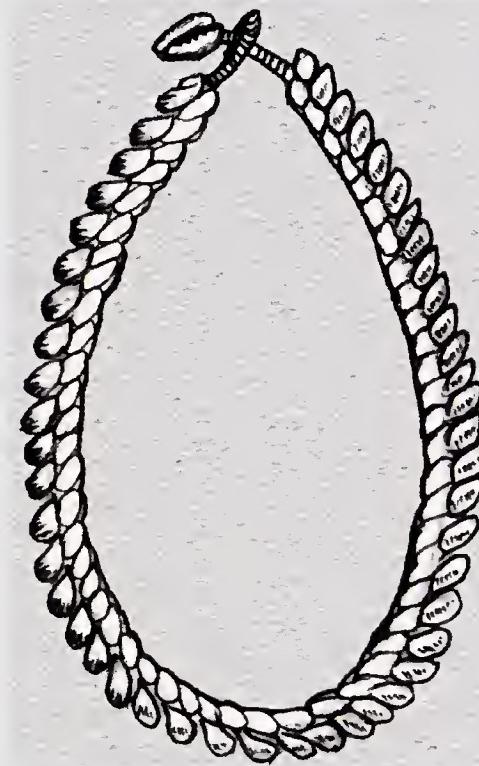
JARAWA
Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Among a classical hunter-gatherer tribe like the Jarawas a strong sense of self ornamentation is noticed. The women use necklace and girdle of cowries strung with a vegetable fibre.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

The Kota, Irula and the Korava women use bead necklace decorated with cowrie shells. The Bondo girls wear cowrie and bead necklace with cowrie fastener. The Korku women wear necklace of cowries arranged in clusters of three with red and blue glass beads in the centre making them resemble flowers.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

The Gond and the Muria men often wear a choker around the neck composed of two or three rows of cowrie shells stitched on to a cloth band.



DHULIA
Chhattisgarh



BISON-HORN MARIA
Chhattisgarh

Armlet or armband is a very common ornament used by so many tribes irrespective of sex. Normally it is worn during dancing or festivities. Among the Murias, Bison-horn Marias, Gonds, Dhulias and the Panikas a male dancer wears cowrie armlets. The Banjara women use armlet traditionally adorned with cowries throughout the subcontinent. Thread and silver ornaments ornamented with cowrie shells are used by the Todas. Cowrie bracelet is worn by the Dhulias, Panikas and some Naga boys.



TODA
Tamil Nadu

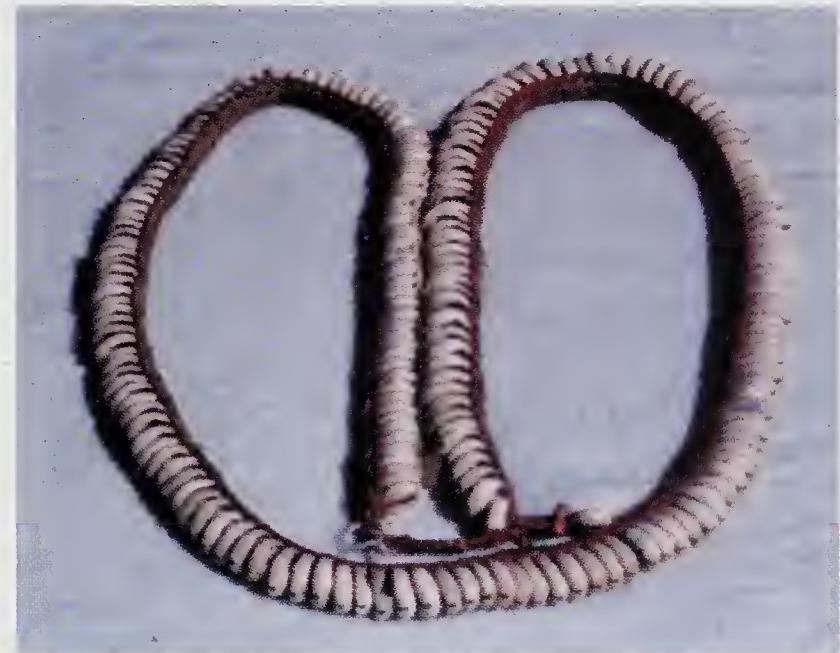


TODA
Tamil Nadu



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

The Hill Maria and the Muria boys use waist cord of cowries. The girdle of the Todas bears bunches of cowries at the two terminal ends.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

A unique ornament comprising bunches of cowries hanging from a string is worn below the knees around the calf muscles by the Great Andamanese male during their dance. Some Naga groups are known to wear strings of cowries, tightly tied below the knees.

The anklet worn by the Lambadi women is an embroidered strip of silk adorned with tassels and cowries.



GREAT ANDAMANESE
Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Dress

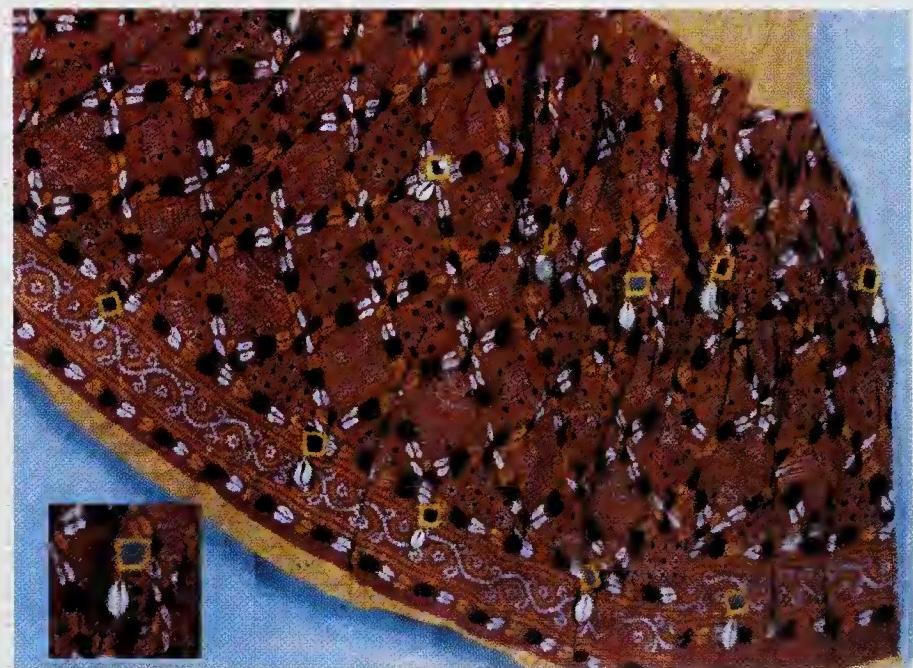


LAMBADI
Andhra Pradesh

Cowrie is seen to decorate the wearing apparel of many a people. The covering cloth or veil used by the Lambadi women is bejewelled with cowries. The Banjara's head piece is bordered with cowries.

The variegated cords of an embroidered *choli* (blouse) used by the Lambadi girls are ornamented with cowries and beads.

The Banjara women wear colourful skirts with exquisite embroidery work bearing cowrie setting.



BANJARA
Rajasthan



DHULIA
Chhattisgarh

The Dhulia boys wear jackets with cowrie setting as a part of ceremonial dress.

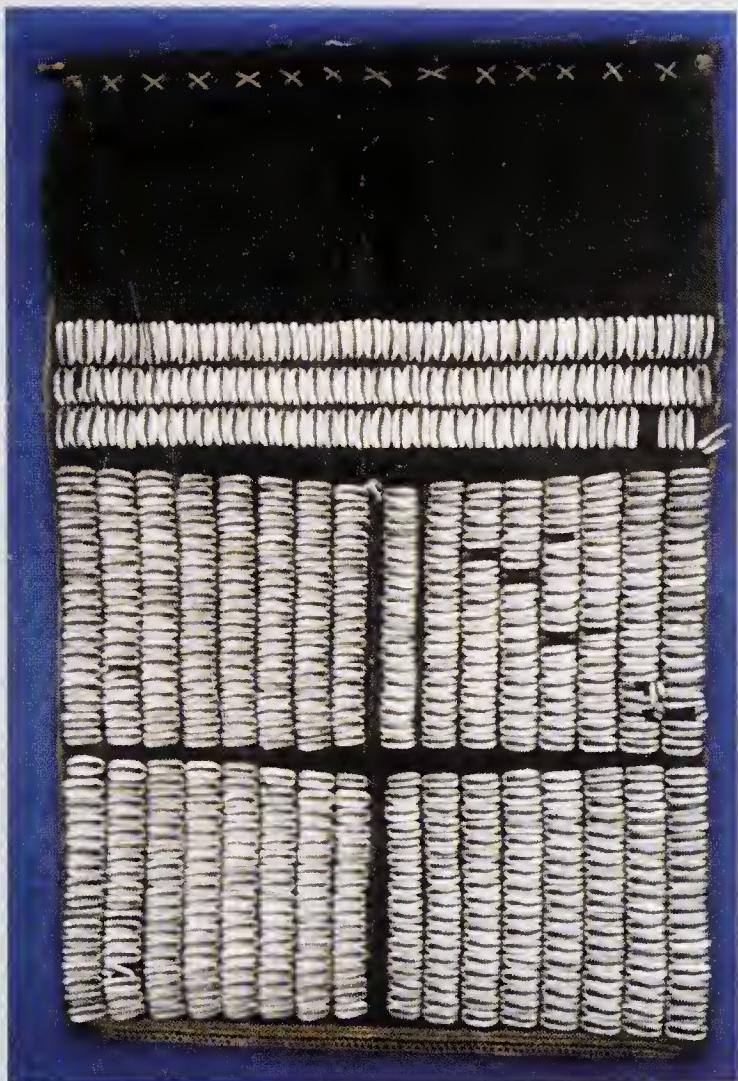


MURIA
Chhattisgarh

The festal dress of the Muria boys bears a large number of cowries. The jacket is studded with cowries. Strings of cowries are seen to hang as streamers from the headdress. Little bunches of cowries also hang from the waist girdle of brass bells.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh



NAGA
Nagaland



NAGA
Nagaland

The Angami Nagas wear a cotton sash adorned with cowries and fringed with goat's hair over the shoulder.

The traditional dress of an Angami Naga youth is black kilt embroidered with cowrie shells.

The Sema Naga women wear cowries strung horizontally as a belt. A Jhoria *chelik* (young unmarried boy) wears a cowrie belt. The Muria *chelik* use colourful waist belt made of red sewn cloth adorned with cowries and flakes of mica, while dancing.



ADI
Arunachal Pradesh



ADI
Arunachal Pradesh

Among the Adis a belt of cowrie shells is an item of decoration. Many other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh use cowrie belts.



NAGA
Nagaland

Cowrie aprons are worn by the Chang, Sangtam, Yimchunger, Khiemnungan and many other groups of the Nagas. The women weave the aprons, but are not permitted to sew cowries on them. Men sew cowries on the aprons with bamboo needles.

Sometimes, cowries are arranged so as to represent a stylized human figure whose central motif is a cross. The cross is considered as the head of the killed enemy and three rows of shells below the head represent the shoulders, the trunk and the legs respectively.

The Lambadis and the Banjaras use cowries on their belts. The belts used by the Nagas are large in size, very broad at the back and fastened in front. These are made of polished brass plates or coloured canes with cowrie setting.

Gallantry and aristocracy

Among most of the Naga groups cowries are worn by the male only as a sign of martial achievement. But wives and daughters of men who have done the *mithun* sacrifice in the series of Feasts of Merit, are entitled to wear clothes studded with cowries as a mark of distinction.

Feasts of Merit play a very important part in the life of all Naga tribes. These feasts consist of a series of ceremonies in a rising scale of importance finally leading to the sacrifice of *mithun* (*Bos frontalis* – chief sacrificial animal of the Nagas). The social status of an individual depends on the feasts he has given. These ceremonies tend to strengthen the ties of kinship.

The wife of a Rengma Naga whose husband has given a full series of Feasts of Merit is entitled to wear a cowrie girdle over the skirt as reflected glory. In addition to the girdle she wears a string of cowries round the waist. Girls of rich families wear *khao* (cowrie embroidered) cloth.

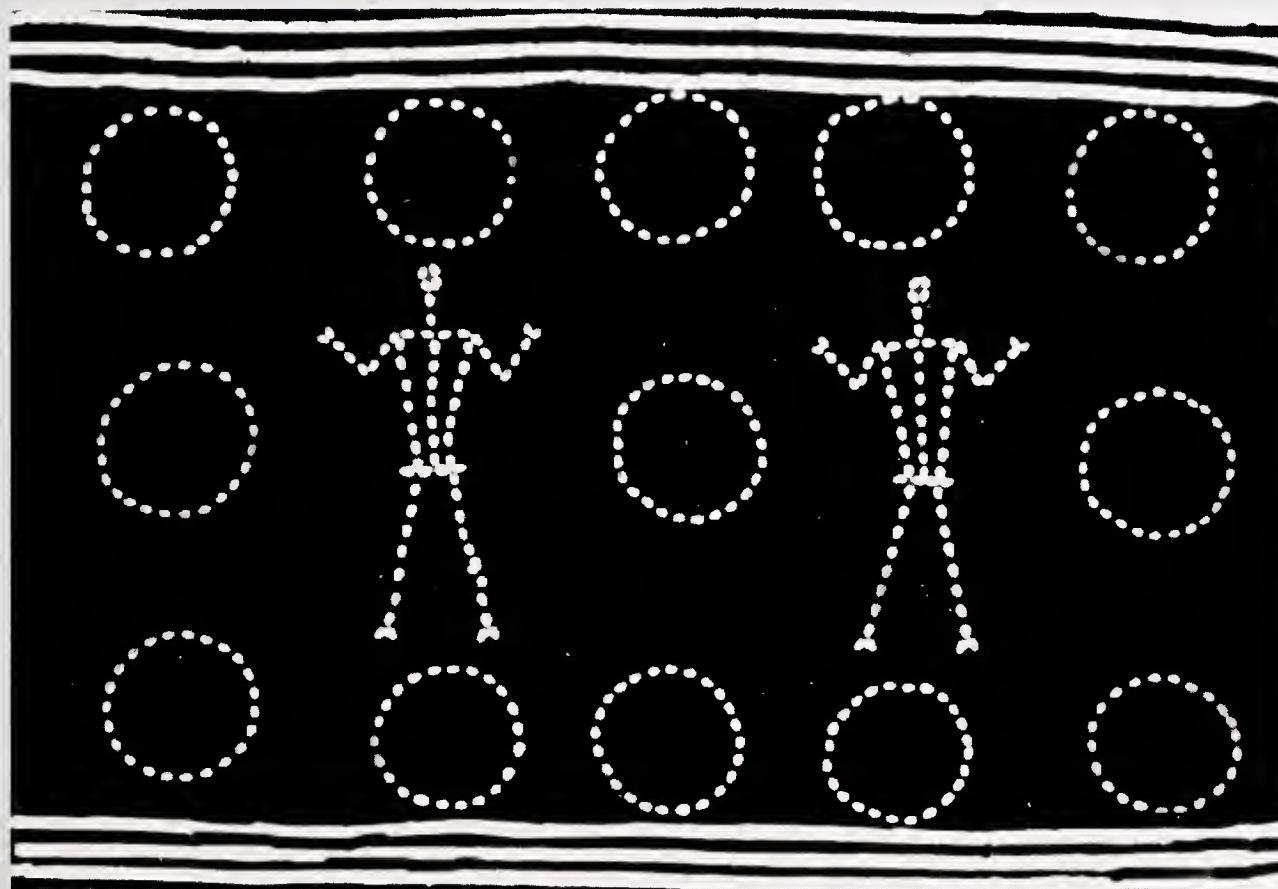
Among the Lakhers the ladies of the Royal Houses wear a particular and special cloth embroidered with cowries and beads. This prestigious cloth forms a part of dowry.



TANGKHUL NAGA
Manipur

The Naga warriors of great renown wear shawls embroidered all over with cowries in a pattern of circle representing stars. Sometimes, human figures in cowries are also inscribed on the shawls. The outline of human figure is indicative of the achievement of the wearer in war.

An Angami Naga warrior, who has taken a head, wears an ornament on his breast in vertical position suspended from the neck. It consists of an oblong piece of wood covered with alternate rows of goat's hair dyed black, red and yellow and adorned with lines of cowries. The ornament indicates the high social status of the wearer.



NAGA
Nagaland

Gauntlets embroidered with cowries and fringed with goat's hair and long human hair adorn the forearms of the Angami Nagas, Sema Nagas, Konyak Nagas, Ao Nagas and some other Naga groups.

Life cycle

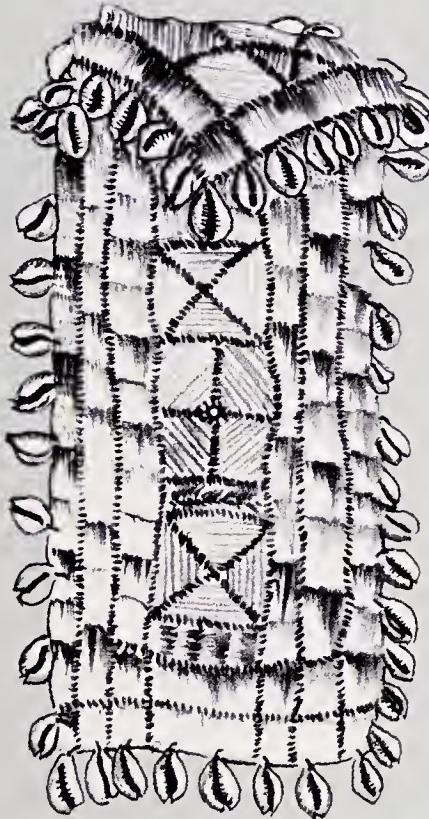
Cowrie plays a special role in the important events of life from birth to death.

To prevent successive death of new born babies a mother often sells her baby to someone immediately after birth in exchange of 1, 3, 5, 7 or 9 cowries. The baby is named accordingly *ek*, *teen*, *panch*, *sat* or *na* cowrie. The psychology behind the sale is to shift the baby from the evil environment prevailing in the family affecting the survival of the new born. It is a very common practice among many caste groups of West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

Cowrie shell is regarded as beneficent power and is worn on the neck or waist of a child, as amulet to ward off evil eye. It is practised by the Kharias, Oraons and many caste groups throughout India. The practice is not restricted to human only. The Kunvis, Oraons and others tie cowries on the neck of cattle to prevent them from harm and evil eye.



A small cowrie-studded basket is a part of dowry which a Hindu bride carries with her to her in-law's house. Ultimately it finds a place in the alter of goddess Lakshmi in her new establishment.



BANJARA
Karnataka

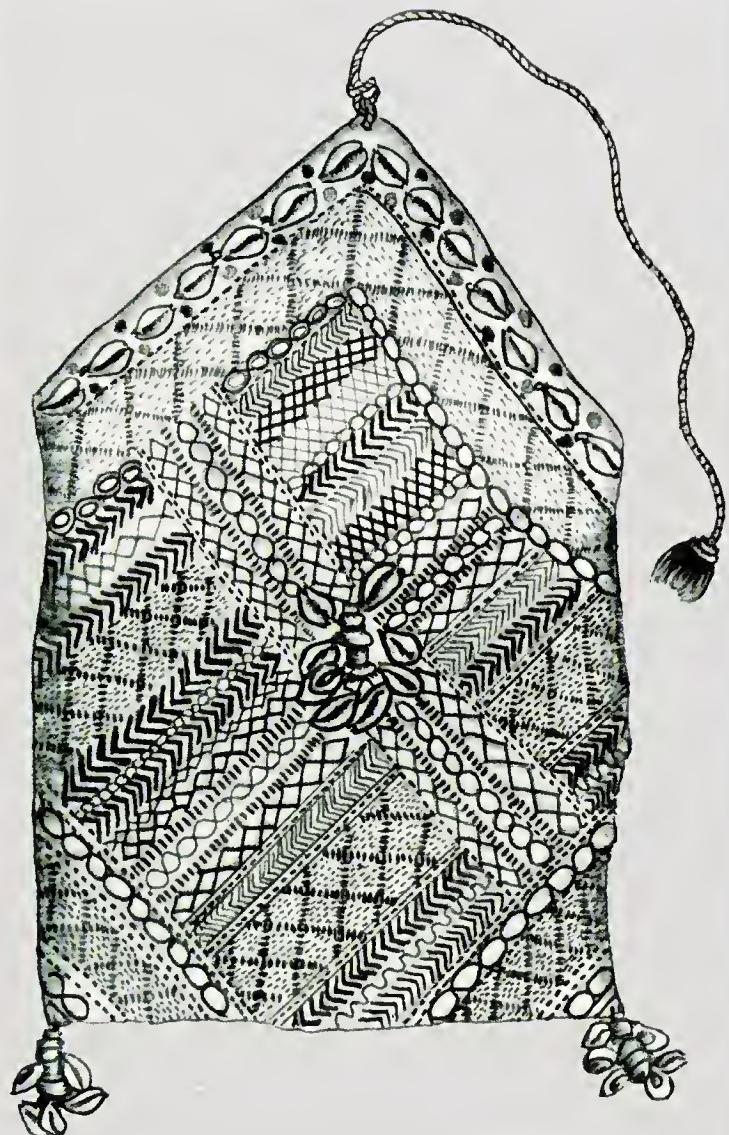
In order to take special care against witches and wizard during wedding occasion, the Murias, Dhulias and the Panikas wear cowrie jacket.

The Bhandaris tie 21 cowries in a knot of new cloth and throw them over the newly wed-couple during marriage ceremony as a customary practice.

During betrothal the Muria parents offer cowries to the Pot of the Departed in the bride's house to compensate the family ancestors for the permanent loss of a girl from their clan.

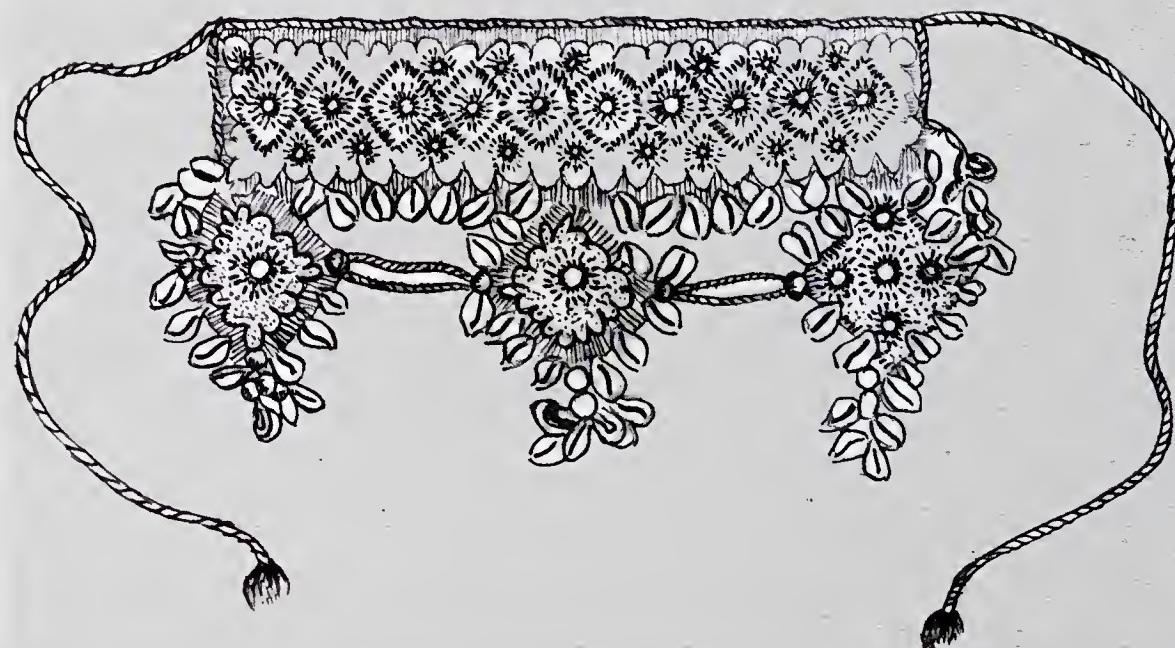
Pot of the Departed is a large earthen pot of permanent nature kept inside the house of the bride to which special offerings are made on all important occasions of Muria life.

The Banjaras decorate their dowry bags with cowries.



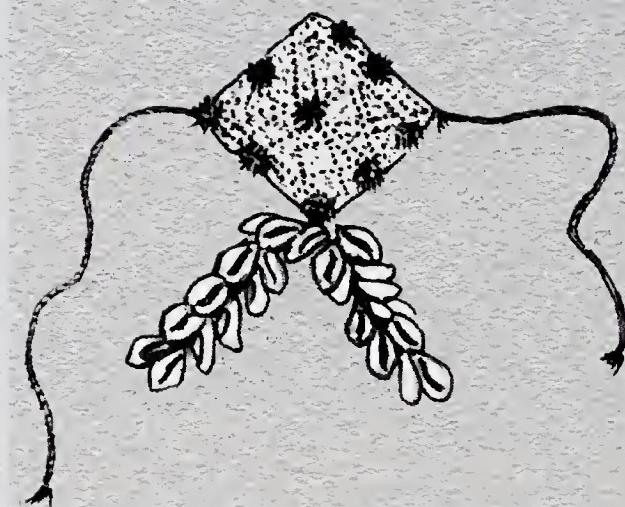
BANJARA
Karnataka

Playing with cowrie shells during marriage ceremony is very common among the Dandasis, Godagalus and many other caste groups of India.



Face-cover

BANJARA
Karnataka



Horn-cover

BANJARA
Karnataka

The face and horns of the bullock are decorated with embroidered cotton strips studded with cowrie shells. This sort of set is made by the mother of the Banjara bride during her daughter's marriage.

The Meches bury a few coins and cowries along with the deceased.

A Lota Naga often ties a cowrie on the wrist of a dead person to propitiate the spirit who guards the path leading to the other world.

The tribes of Bastar throw a handful of cowries into the grave. The Murias tie cowrie on either side of the cloth that covers the corpse.

In the funeral site cowries are offered to the departed soul of the Hindu caste groups of West Bengal as fare for the last ferrying of the soul to the other world.

The Murias often border the memorial pillar with cowrie, erected in honour of a revered person.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

Magico-religious practices



MONPA
Arunachal Pradesh

Cowrie is worshipped for its connection with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, among the Hindus in India. Baskets studded with cowrie or pots smeared with vermillion holding cowries in them are preserved in the altar of the goddess.

A cotton thread strung with cowries is considered as one of the insignia of a Matangi. The Madigas regard a Matangi as the incarnation of the goddess herself.

Chhakka or six cowries, some betel and sweets are offered to Barai (a common minor village god) by the Aherias.

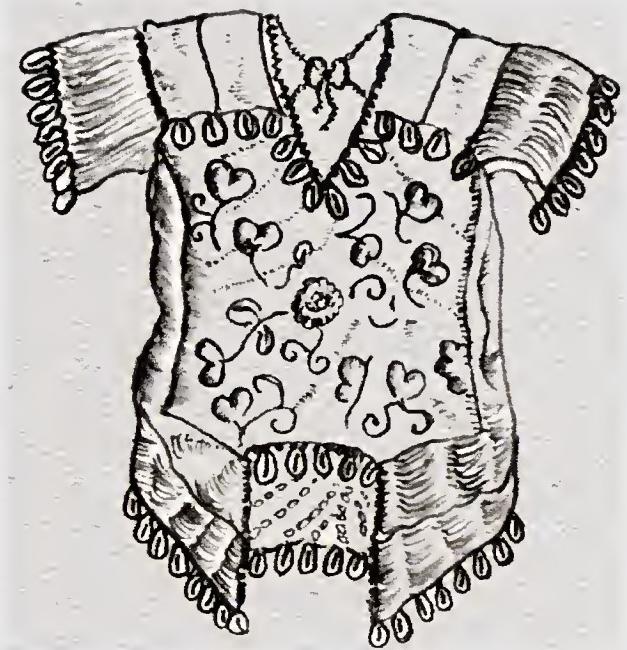
Cowrie is profusely used in the wall-relief to produce a figurative design of goddess Sanjhi, spouses of Lord Shiva, all over north India.

To see a cowrie is a bad omen at the start of a journey as per the Puranic concept.

Mask dance is an important socio-religious aspect of the Buddhist Monpas. A mask dancer attaches cowries on his mask or on his apparel.



GOND
Madhya Pradesh



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

As is customary, a male Muria medium wears a cowrie adorned jacket of a woman, when in trance.

A piece of *dhavalo* cloth, the singlemost important ceremonial dress made and used by the Banjaras of Maharashtra, is decorated with sacred *kodi* or cowrie shells.

The eye of the wooden spirit figure of the Gonds are represented by cowries. The rural women of South 24 Parganas also use cowries to represent eyes, nose and mouth of the local god Ghentu or Ghantakarna in order to appease the god for the protection from skin disease.

The Angami Nagas insert cowries in the eyes of the wooden statues and figurines.

A Kaniyan astrologer uses cowries to decipher the planetary position of his client.

In order to ascertain the spirit causing illness of an individual a Khasi diviner takes the help of cowries.

The Apa Tani priest wears a sash studded with cowries as a part of his ceremonial dress.

Cowrie necklace and bracelet are the parts of the ceremonial outfit of a *gusari*, masked Raj Gond dancer, during Dandami dance.

A milch cow is often protected from evil eye with the help of a cloth cover on her head embedded with cowrie.

Dorla medicine men use cowrie when treating a patient of snake bite.

A custom of offering five cowries at the village boundary with rice and flower is noticed among the Dhurwas. The purpose is to purify the village from the trouble of evil spirit causing epidemics.



APA TANI
Arunachal Pradesh



BHATRA
Chhattisgarh

The Bhatras use a square shaped bamboo basket decorated with cowries and mica flakes stitched on a background of red cloth to keep offerings like food grains during worshipping of a deity.

A Bison-horn Maria medicine man waves a cowrie round the head of a man who is very ill and unable to eat.

Many tribes of Bastar carry replicas of their deities in beautifully decorated small *doli* (palanquin) during ritual festivals like Koksar, Marai or Dussera etc. from respective villages to the place of rituals. These *doli* are often decorated with cowries.



BHATRA
Chhattisgarh

Fertility cult

It is believed in many parts of the world that cowrie confers fertility on women and help in the process of parturition.

In north India goddess Sanjhi is associated with fecundity. Rural women of Medinipur, West Bengal, worship Birinchi Baba, a local god responsible for reproduction. A temporary image of the god is made by the women themselves with cowdung, mud and cowries. The Murias associate cowrie with female genitalia, as is evident from some of their marriage rhymes.

Playing with cowrie shells during marriage rituals by many tribes and castes of India, is, perhaps, indicative of the close association of cowrie with fertility.



CASTE GROUPS
Uttar Pradesh

Currency

The intermediate period between barter and money economy is occupied by cowries as currency. The use of cowrie as currency is an age-old practice prevalent in many parts of the world not to speak of India or the tribals alone.

In fact trade by barter was replaced by currency. The durability of cowrie made it suitable for transaction from hand to hand. Land revenue in India was paid in cowrie even during the colonial period. It is revealed from Hindu scriptures that remuneration of priest for religious performances was paid in cowrie. Gold, silver or copper coinage was used by the kings, rich men or traders for bulk transaction. The low income group used cowrie for retail purchase in the market. Nominal payment like ferry-boat fare was paid in cowrie. Petty business women even today retain single cowrie inside their cloth purse which may be considered as the persistence of an age-old practice.

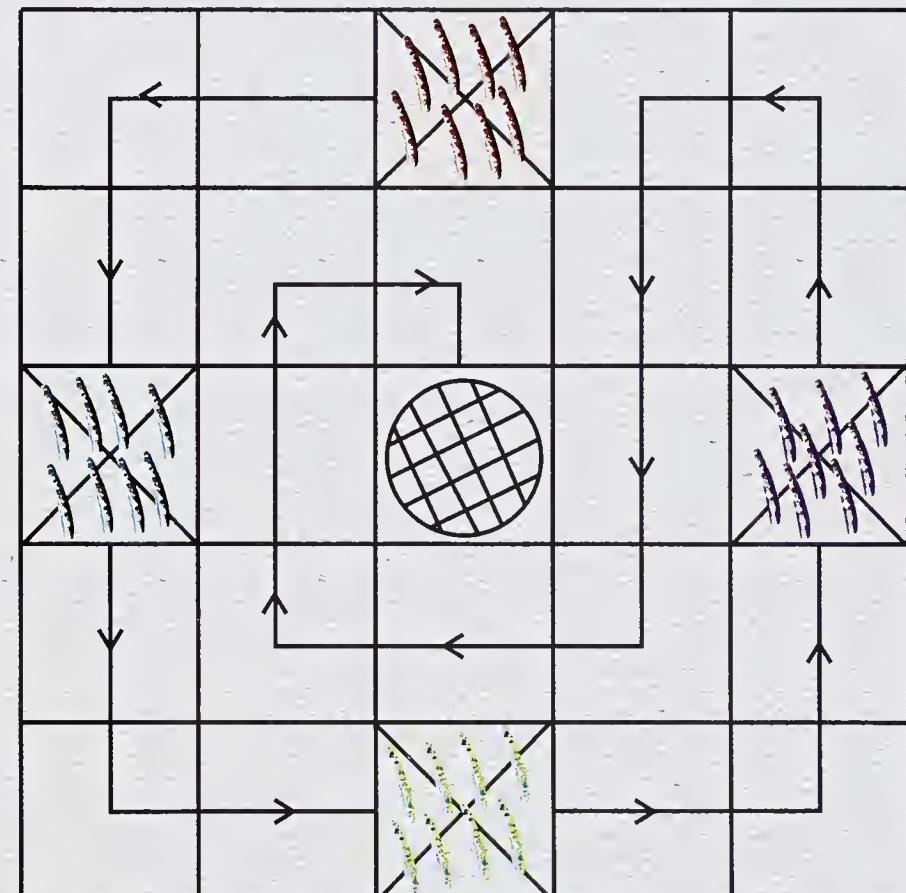
The exchange value of cowrie, well-recorded in the elementary book of arithmetical enumeration, bespeaks of the use of cowrie as currency.

Play and games

Cowrie has been an item of play and game and gambling as well.

Rural women play games of cowrie during their leisure till today. History tells us that they also played *bagh bandi* (trapping tiger), *das-panchis* (ten-twentyfive), *solo ghar* (sixteen rooms), *aria ghar* (two and a half rooms), etc. with the help of cowries during the reign of Sasanka in Bengal some 1400 years ago. The Bauris of Orissa cast five cowries as dice during plays. Rural women of Jaisalmer play with four cowries.

Cowries are used to play board games in many parts of India. *Chausar* or *chaupad* or *chaupat* is one of the oldest board games prevalent in Rajasthan, Haryana, Garhwal, Maharashtra, Gujarat and elsewhere. The Rabaris, Raghvis, Rajputs, Meghwals, Garhwalis and others enjoy this race game.



Board game

BAURI
Orissa

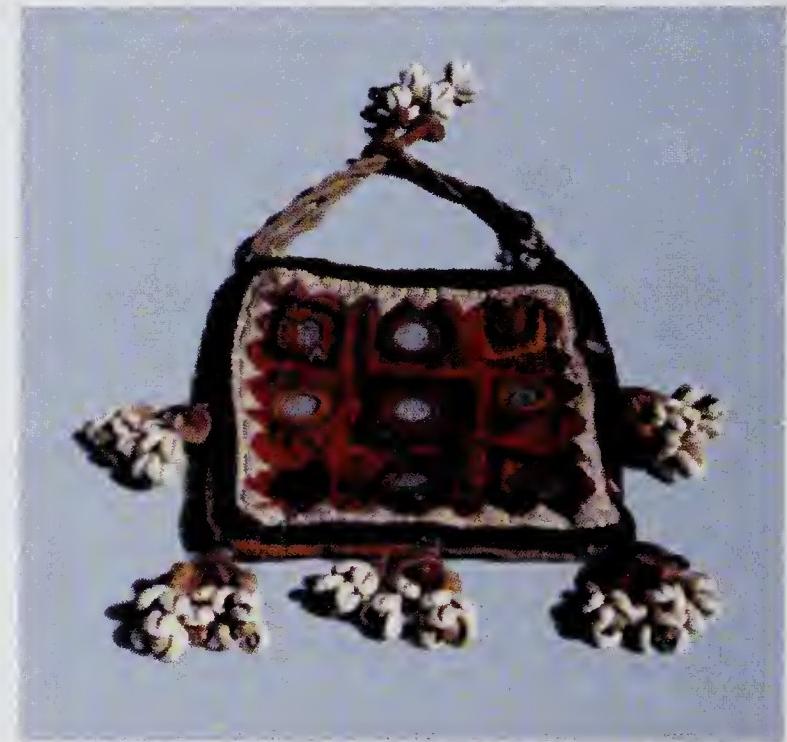


TODA
Tamil Nadu

Lambadi women adorn *gala* (pad) with cowries. The *gala* is placed on the crown while carrying water in pitchers.

Small brightly coloured cotton hand bags of the Lambadis, Banjaras and the Todas are decorated with cowries.

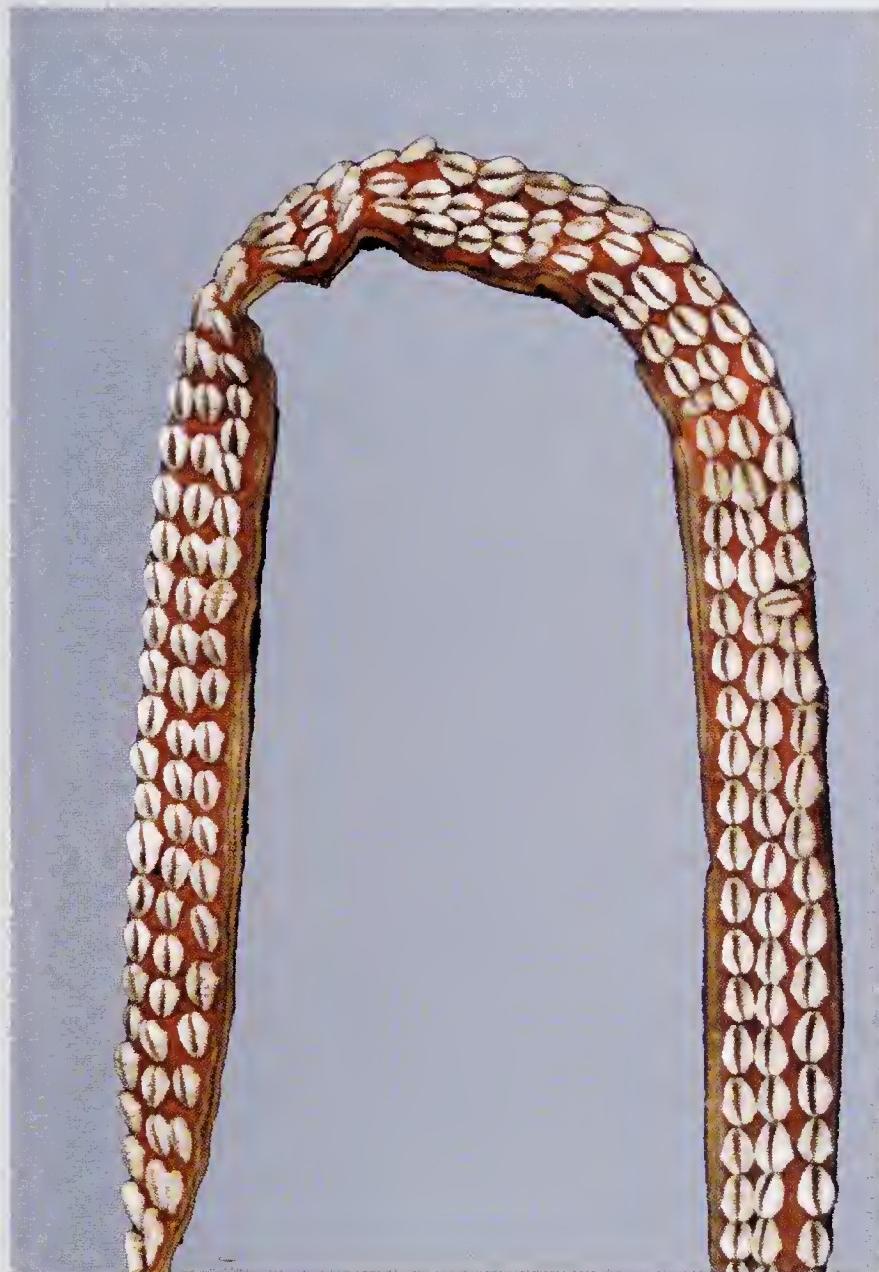
Utility goods



BANJARA
Chhattisgarh



BANJARA
Chhattisgarh



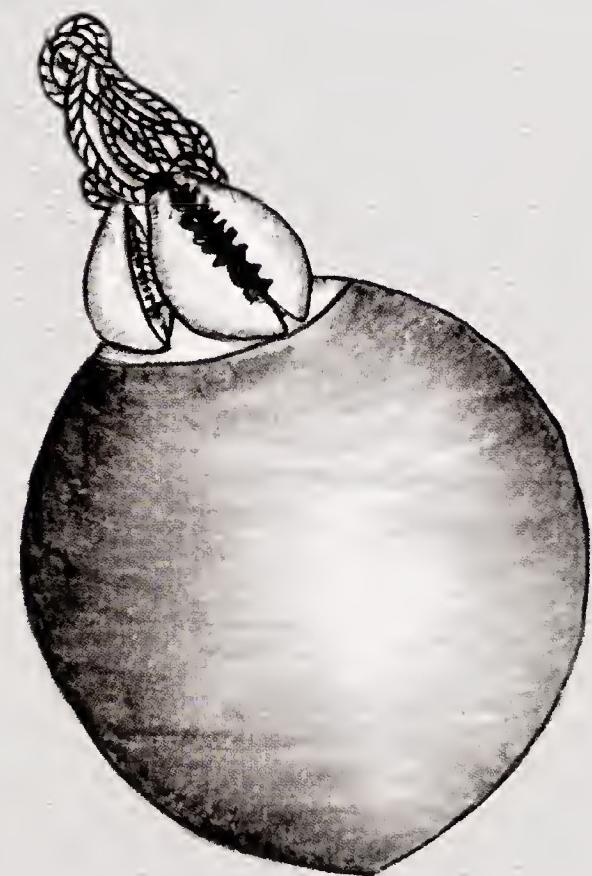
GALLONG
Arunachal Pradesh

Cowries are used as fastener in tobacco box for tying the same to a waist cord of the user as is found among the Murias.

Dancing shield of the Hill Marias is decorated with cowries.

The belt holding a *dao* is invariably embroidered with cowries as found among the Gallongs, Nagas and some other tribes of north-east India.

The gun powder flask of the Lakhers is worn on a cotton sling, often decorated with cowries.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

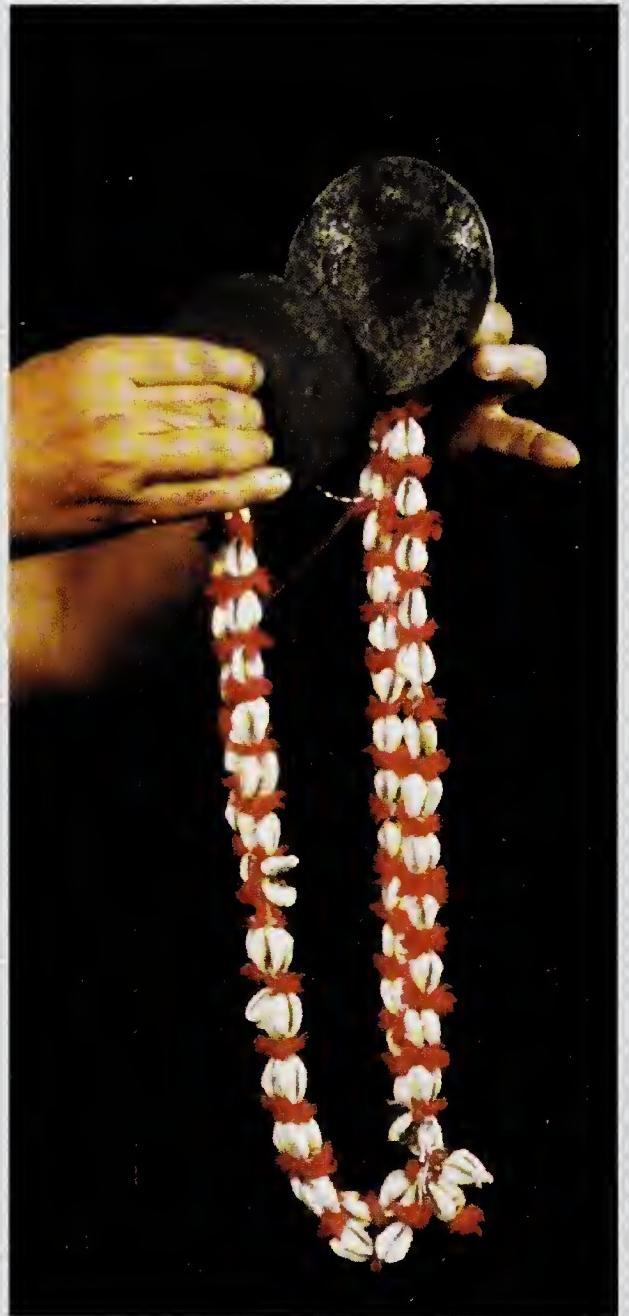


BAIGA
Madhya Pradesh

Buffalo and goat's skin shield of some of the Naga groups is often ornamented by goat's hair dyed scarlet and cowries.

Muria girls use cymbals joined to each other by a long string of cowries. The Baigas decorate their drums with strings of cowries.

The decoration reveals their aesthetic sense as well as emotional attachment with the objects they use.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

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